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Constructing Depth through Jane: Contemporary Interactions between Austen and Interiority

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at
Syracuse University

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and Renée Crown University Honors
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Honors Capstone Project in English and Textual Studies

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Abstract

The world is saturated with Jane Austen. She is in the movies, in bookstores, and in college courses. For years “lowbrow” and “highbrow” readers have fought over the “proper” way to read her work. Ian Watt, a popular literary critic, argued that Austen’s value resides in her use of interiority. For years, interiority was held as the measure of a novel’s worth or depth. Deidre Lynch exposed this interiority Watt spoke of as a cultural taste—one which Austen and Watt emerged from and helped to create.

In this project, I look at two contemporary manifestations of Austen—one that is considered more “lowbrow” and one that is considered more academic or “highbrow.” In the first, I look at the many Austen fanfictions and movie adaptations that have been made. These include sequels and retellings of Austen’s novels. My focus is on both the content of these fanfictions and the marketing strategies used to introduce them to the public. In the second chapter, I look at a new branch of literary theory referred to as cognitive science theory. Through examining how cognitive science theorists interact and dissect Austen, it becomes clear that they are operating along the same canon of interiority that Watt helped to solidify.

My project takes off from Lynch’s argument that interiority is an ideological formation that emerged out of a cultural taste for depth. Through fanfiction and cognitive science theory, I show that her argument about Watt and Austen is still relevant when applied to today’s interactions with Austen. Furthermore, I show that the definition of depth changes based on the group hoping to invoke it.

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